Focus

WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY

Changing the Surface Water Quality Standards from a "Class-Based" to a "Use-Based" Format

The Washington Department of Ecology is proposing to revise several key aspects of the state's surface water quality standards. This focus sheet provides a summary of changing the surface water quality standards from a "class-based" to a "use-based" format for fresh waters in the state (No. 7 of 8).

What is a "class-based" format and how does it work?

Ecology administers the state's surface water quality standards (Chapter 173-201A WAC). These standards establish minimum water quality requirements to assure that rivers, lakes, and marine waters will remain clean enough to protect uses such as swimming, fishing, aquatic life habitat, and agricultural and domestic water supplies.

In the current rule, each waterbody is currently assigned to one of five classes -- Class AA, Class A, Class B, Class C, and Lake Class. Class AA is considered the highest quality and clean enough to support all uses. Each class has a specific set of beneficial uses that must be protected and a specific set of water quality criteria limiting the amount of pollution allowed for waterbodies of that class. Ecology refers to this approach as a "class-based" format.

What would a new "use-based" format look like?

The new use-based format would only apply to fresh waters. The key difference between the class-based format and a use-based format is in the way uses are assigned for protection. Rather than assigning waters to classes having pre-determined sets of beneficial uses (regardless of what the waterbody can actually support) beneficial uses would be assigned to waterbodies independently of each other. Ecology refers to this approach as a "use-based" format.

Will the change to a use-based format affect criteria and uses of a waterbody?

The change to a use-based format will not initially change any of the existing beneficial uses and criteria that now apply to fresh waters:

- The change to a use-based format does not cause changes to numeric criteria. Changes in the numeric criteria (outlined in the other focus sheets) are being proposed to reflect new science and protect beneficial uses.
- The change to a use-based format will not cause a change in the beneficial uses. A scientific study and separate rule-making would be necessary to downgrade or remove any beneficial uses.

December 2002

Department of Ecology is an equal-opportunity agency.

Publication Number 00-10-064 (revised)

Printed on Recycled Paper

Why is the proposed change better than what we have?

Changing from a class-based to a use-based format will, in the future, provide greater flexibility to assign the most scientifically defensible combination of beneficial uses to a specific waterbody. For example, the new format would allow a waterbody to be protected as a high-quality recreational area without also needing to be protected as a salmon spawning area if it were determined that salmon did not, and never would, spawn in that waterbody. This is not currently possible under the existing class-based format because both uses are grouped into the same class.

Also, in the use-based format, criteria would be assigned to individual beneficial uses instead of entire sets of beneficial uses. This way, everyone would know which criteria were being assigned to which beneficial use. The proposed approach would provide greater transparency was well as a more flexible approach to water quality protection.

How will Ecology ensure beneficial uses will be protected?

The switch to the new use-based format will more easily allow future fine-tuning of beneficial uses in waterbodies. An increased number of choices will be available when designating uses for protection. Both the addition and removal of beneficial uses and their water quality criteria, however, will have to adhere to strict protocols established in federal regulations. Any proposed change in beneficial uses would still require revising the water quality standards through a formal rule-making process.

How do I learn more?

To learn more about the proposed change from a class-based format to a use-based format, to obtain copies of focus sheets or discussion documents, or to be added to the mailing list, contact Andrew Kolosseus at (360) 407-7543. Or, visit our web site at www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/swqs. To receive electronic updates on the water quality standards revisions, send an e-mail message to swqs@ecy.wa.gov, with "Subscribe" as the subject heading.

If you have special accommodation needs, contact Ann Butler at (360) 407-6480. The TTY number is 711 or 1-800-833-6388.